

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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DECEMBER 25th, 1940

DEAR MEMBER,

The Staff of the News-Letter unite in wishing you a good Christmas and New Year.

We are reminded at this season that at a particular time in the history of the world, and on a particular day, a new thing, a new force, entered into the world. From that birth at Bethlehem sprang the Christian Church. The Church is thus very relevant to our thoughts at Christmas time.

I have just been reading an admirable address by the Master of Balliol on the relation of the Church to the secular life. It appeared in the November issue of the Bulletin of the Anglican Evangelical Group Movement (247 Grand Buildings, Trafalgar Square, London, W.C.2). The Master maintains that it is not the primary business of the Church to say that certain things ought to be done by the various institutions of secular society. Institutions, and in particular the state, are concerned with the standard of behaviour which may be expected from ordinary men and women, but the Church ought to be the live pioneer of moral and spiritual development—a society that exhibits a higher level of Christian conduct than is the average in the state.

In every society there are three classes of people. First there are those who take as much and give as little as they can. Secondly, there are the mass of ordinary, decent, respectable people who pay their way, exacting their rights and fulfilling their duties. Thirdly, there are those who give more than they get. These are the creative element in society. The health and vitality of a society depends on the proportion of this element to the rest. From the social point of view the supreme service of the Church to society is to create this third class of people, and to unite them in a living fellowship of service.

If the Church were alive enough—if it were truly the Church—an enormous number of our social difficulties would go. These arise in the main because the things that divide people seem to count for more than those which unite them. If the Christian fellowship in the Church were a reality it would mean that the unity enjoyed in membership of the Church by employers and employed would be something that signified more than their divisions in industry. A Church ought to be a society so much alive, that for those who experience its fellowship the things that divide become unreal and the things that belong to the common calling the most real. If the Church were really that, it would not need to do anything else because in political and social matters what is most important is example. Nothing is so exciting as living in fellowship.

This line of thought is developed more fully in the Master's recent book *The Two Moralities* (Eyre and Spottiswood, 3s. 6d.) which is an illuminating treatment of the ethical problems of society today.

THE VICTORIES IN ALBANIA AND EGYPT

The brilliant victories of the Greeks in Albania and the British in the Libyan desert give a brighter tinge to the international outlook at Christmas time than we could have dared to hope for a few weeks ago. But if the tide of victory begins to turn in our favour, we must remember that the spiritual dangers of success are as real as those of defeat and

call us to renewed prayer. It is told of Lord Milner that he said on one occasion, "Many people, when the British Empire is mentioned, seem to want to wave flags, or to sing 'Rule Britannia,' or something of that sort; I have the feeling, when I think of it, that I want to go away by myself and pray." Few things that have appeared in the News-Letter are more deserving of continued remembrance than the paragraphs from a letter which I quoted last week under the heading "The Christian Temper."

BOOKS

The recent broadcast talks by the Archbishop of York are being published by the Student Movement Press under the title *The Hope of a New World* (3s. 6d.). Those who heard them, or read them in *The Listener*, will know how much of value they contain. The Bishop of Chichester's Penguin Special *Christianity and World Order* deals with central and vital issues—too many perhaps for the space at his disposal, but as a broad survey it is excellent. *A Great Opportunity* is the title of a pamphlet (4d. post free) by the Editor of *The Fortnightly* (13 Buckingham Street, London, W.C.2), reprinted from that journal; it is a moving plea, based on first-hand knowledge of conditions in London, for a national effort to remove the evils which are destroying the lives of multitudes of our citizens.

OUR COLLABORATORS

The number of those who are helping us in the News-Letter in one way or another is so great that we have not attempted to extend the list of those who promised their collaboration when the News-Letter was started. It may, however, be interesting to mention again some of those who have given us outstanding help in the past year by writing a Supplement or giving advice. These include:

The Rev. M. E. Aubrey
Professor John Baillie
The Master of Balliol
Professor Ernest Barker
Henry Brooke, M.P.
Professor F. Clarke
The Rev. V. A. Demant
Professor C. H. Dodd
T. S. Eliot
Professor H. H. Farmer
Dr. Kurt Hahn
The Viscount Hambleden

Sir Hector Hetherington
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The Rev. J. W. Parkes
Dr. William Paton
Dorothy L. Sayers
The Bishop of Sheffield
Bishop N. S. Talbot
Geoffrey Vickers, V.C.
The Rev. A. R. Vidler
Principal J. S. Whale
The Archbishop of York
Sir Alfred Zimmern

Owing to the increased population in Oxford the Post Office here is working under exceptional pressure. Christmas posts impose a heavy burden throughout the country. If your News-Letters and Christmas orders arrive late, you will understand that the delay has been unavoidable.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER, ARLOSH HALL, MANSFIELD ROAD, OXFORD.

DECEMBER 25TH 1940

NOT IN THE NEWS

NO one knew it was happening. That is as important as almost any other fact about it. Herod did not know; he found out a little later, and "re-acted," as we say now-a-days, with totalitarian thoroughness. The High Priest did not know; he was maintaining his precarious balance between a Government which might disestablish him and a crowd of devotees who were fanatically anti-Erastian. The inn-keeper did not know; he was doing a roaring trade with all the folk who had come to their birth-place to fill in the census-return. No one knew.

Well, not quite "no one." Some shepherds had an inkling about it; it seems they had been oddly affected by the silence and loneliness of their night-watch, and some obscure process of psychological compensation, as some people are liable to say now-a-days, projected against the irresponsive heavens a vision of celestial companions. And Joseph was not quite without understanding of the event. And Mary—but we will not let the clumsy fingers of modern speculation play upon the exquisite mystery of her surrender, her readiness to receive what God should give, her wondering exaltation of her lowliness which the Lord had regarded. Yet even she, though rapt in adoring gratitude, did not know what it was that was happening. In that sense of the words, no one knew.

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee to-night.

I don't know what Augustus was doing that night; if it had any public reference, no doubt he and everyone about him thought it very important. If an angel had come to him instead of to the shepherds and had said "Leave all this alone; it does not matter; nothing matters to-night except the fact that a poor woman has had

a baby in a stable"—Augustus and his courtiers would have thought a lunatic was playing a practical joke on them; or else that, having presumably enjoyed the Falernian, they were "projecting" things.

No one knew it was happening; but it mattered more than anything else that ever happened at all. Of course this does not mean that all obscure events are important. But it does mean that our estimates of what is important are alarmingly fallacious. Those who have eyes to see can read that lesson elsewhere and not only at Bethlehem. "The face of external nature teaches the same lesson. Nature will not have us fret and fume. She does not like our benevolence or our learning much better than she likes our frauds and wars. When we come out of the caucus, or the bank, or the Abolition-convention, or the Temperance meeting, or the Transcendental club, into the fields and woods, she says to us, 'So hot? my little sir'."

Life tends to be imprisoned in Civilisation; yet we can, if we choose, hear the voice which calls: "This civilisation is your own; therefore you are bigger than it can ever be. Your way of escape is always open. You can laugh at it: you can see what a poor thing it is: you are its maker: and it is but a tiresome toy after all. Break it up, if you are bored with it. Get up, and go far away from all this money-grubbing business which those burly Anglo-Saxons are taking so seriously. It is all a bad joke. There is a whole world outside it, far better and sweeter. Come along! Don't sit there plodding and doddering all day! Why not come with us?"

'I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree'."

Emerson and Scott Holland had the simple sanity which keeps perspectives true; and the naïve paganism of the mood expressed in these two quotations is a useful check upon all self-important moralisms. But what happened at Bethlehem searches us out with a still more penetrating probe.

No one knew what was happening; more than that—hardly anyone could know. The thing that happened was not deliberately hidden; it was in its own nature obscure. Yet it was, as Phillips Brooks put it, the meeting place of the hopes and fears of all the years.

Now—can we get this into our nearly impenetrable heads? Hardly anything that is recorded in the newspapers is ever of first-rate importance. Because the things of first-rate importance are spiritual events which are known only by their results. Some of them are, of course, really important, but each is always less important than the spiritual event which is the source of them all. The most alert and intrusive of reporters could never have hit upon that stable as the scene of a world-shaking event. When the Baby was become a Man

and they executed Him, some report might appear. Probably it would be without comment; or the Left Wing might regret that lack of a definite policy had involved a promising reformer in futility, while the Right Wing might temper a censure of indifference to the social order with a kindly recognition (now able to be expressed without risk) of an unselfish though misguided spirit, while the Religious Press would insist, after the event, that, of course, persecution was to be deprecated, but this young layman who was for putting the theologians to rights was, after all, impossible. So even if the external event was reported, still it would be true that no one knew what was happening. That Birth, that Life, that Death could not be recognised by contemporaries for what it was.

Of course *we* recognise it now. Oh, do we? Even on the showing of our own profession we convict ourselves. We say all the great phrases about the thing that happened long ago; and those phrases declare that it was not a past episode but an eternal fact. It was God who so died: God, who is Himself eternal and the eternal principle of all that is. What happened once in that obscure but turbulent corner of the Roman Empire is always happening; and no one knows it is happening. We can't know how or where; but we might try to believe that it is going on somewhere.

We have to go on with the business in hand. Just now it is the war. The result of the war matters as much as anything that gets into the newspapers. But there are things that matter more. The spirit in which we fight matters more than our winning. If we go Nazi and then win, it will be the same for the world as if the Nazis win. But if we can keep charity alive with courage, our victory will be a boon to mankind, and our defeat would be a redemptive agony.

And even while we fight there may be somewhere a new idea conceived, a baby born, whose effect upon the world will for future historians put even this world-conflict in the shade. In 636 A.D. Jerusalem surrendered to the Caliph Omar; in 635 Oswald had defeated Caedwalla and had summoned Aidan from Iona. On balance, did Christendom gain or lose in those two years? Perhaps the Chinese war really matters more than the European; perhaps something that is not a war at all matters more than either.

A vast number of persons in a great number of nations are singing Christmas hymns to-day. What a reversal of all our habits it would be if they all entered into the meaning of Christmas and accepted its re-valuation of human concerns.

Yet there is the precious fact. Though no one knew it was happening, it did happen. The dayspring from on high visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death

(in Coventry or Cologne, in London or Berlin) and to guide our feet where we long to set them—into the way of peace. .

And of course the thing that happened then is always ready to reproduce itself. Then it happened once for all; but it must happen also repeatedly in all; and its happening when it does is more important than any battle or treaty:

No ear may hear His coming
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him, still
The dear Christ enters in.

Can we be merry this Christmas? There is so much terror in the world, so much heart-breaking sorrow. Before the sorrow we can only bow in reverent sympathy, waiting for God to give the comfort that comes only from the assurance of His love. But for the terrors—they are only bogeys. We shall listen to the news on Christmas Day as on other days; and if it is good (for us) we shall be glad; if it is bad (for us) we shall be sorry. But we shall carry in our hearts Good News, which when it happened was not in the news at all: "Unto you is born in the City of David a Saviour"—a Saviour: and at least we all know now that we need Him. Will the world, this time, pay some practical attention to the Good News as well as sing hymns about it? I wonder. Nothing else really matters.

WILLIAM EBOR:

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